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# **Theatricality, Michael Fried, and Nineteenth-Century Art and Theatre**

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## **Abstract:**

This provocation uses a case study of the French history painter Paul Delaroche to examine the way in which theatricality is invoked as a critical term. Michael Fried considers Delaroche's work to exemplify theatricality, a designation that, for him, connotes qualities of exaggeration and inauthenticity, but I argue that this is not how Delaroche was viewed in his own time. This leads to a wider consideration of the assumptions that underpin thinking about theatricality. In particular, I question the idea that theatricality is a quality of popular, as opposed to avant-garde, art. Finally, I want to challenge the automatic association between theatre and artifice that is threaded through discussions of theatricality.

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This provocation deals with the problem of theatricality in relation to nineteenth-century art, and, in particular, the way in which discussion of it has been determined by the work of Michael Fried. In a series of books on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting, Fried drew on contemporary writings, especially those of Diderot, to establish theatricality, and its opposite, absorption, as determining categories for the art of this period (Fried 1980; Fried 1990; Fried 1996). For Fried, theatricality is clearly a negative value, as it was for nineteenth-century critics, for whom it suggested qualities of exaggeration and inauthenticity. However, for Fried, the term carries greater weight, since he posits it as antithetical to absorption, a concept less grounded in contemporary discourses, but which he regards as the defining quality of 'progressive' art. Fried designates the work of the French history

painter Paul Delaroche as exemplifying theatricality, but I want to argue against this. Contrary to Fried's evaluation, that is not how this artist was viewed in his own time. This leads me to a wider consideration of the thinking that underpins the way that scholars invoke this term when writing about nineteenth-century art. In particular, I question the assumption that theatricality is a quality of popular, as opposed to avant-garde, art. Finally, I want to challenge the automatic association between theatre and artifice that is threaded through discussions of theatricality.

Nineteenth-century artists were faced with a predicament. History painting – the portrayal of significant human action – was traditionally regarded as a form of static theatre in which the gestures, attitudes, and expressions of the figures were able to compensate for the silence of the medium (Cooke and Lübbren 2016: 11). The artist was required to elicit strong emotional responses from the spectator, choosing the single moment from a given narrative that would most effectively convey the emotional import of a situation. Yet this had to be achieved without the painting ever appearing contrived. Bodily expression was thought to be a natural language, innately understood by all people, and predating speech (Barasch 1987: 1-2). Tapping into this vocabulary, artists could, it was thought, communicate complex emotional states in a way that was more fundamental, and therefore more universal, than words. Fried's definition of theatricality is based on Diderot's negative response to the rhetorical performance style of his own time in which, according to Diderot, the players arranged themselves in a semi-circle and addressed the audience rather than each other (Diderot 1965: 268-9). Diderot argued that a figure that acknowledged the beholder – that appeared preoccupied by the aim either to please or to communicate – could not, at the same time, express a given emotion authentically. Hence, in painting, attitudes that were self-consciously graceful or over-blown were deemed 'theatrical'. Such figures were perceived to be performing, rather than really experiencing, a given emotion. Appearing false, they would fail to activate the viewer's emotional response. Theatricality continued to be a live issue in the nineteenth century with Stendhal, for instance, complaining of the theatrical

attitude of the mother in Léon Cogniet's *Massacre of the Innocents*, writing that 'all I can do is put my hand on my heart and say, "No, it does not beat"' (Stendhal 1824: 31). The challenge for artists was to strike a balance. They were required to please and to communicate; yet at the same time they needed to avoid the sort of over-solicitation that would compromise naturalness and thereby obstruct the viewer's emotional engagement.

Fried is in no doubt as to where Delaroche stands in this debate. In his book *Courbet's Realism* of 1990, he describes Delaroche as '[enthusiastically] embracing ... the most explicit forms of theatricality' and as an artist 'for whom the Diderotian project of neutralizing the presence of the beholder was a closed book' (Fried 1990: 33). Fried cites the attitudes of the contemporary critic Gustave Planche as evidence for his view. Planche, writes Fried, 'castigated them (Delaroche and other artists working in this mode) precisely for their theatrical or melodramatic qualities'. Fried offers what he takes to be clinching evidence of Delaroche's theatricality in the fact that one of the paintings he exhibited at the Salon of 1831, *Les Enfants d'Edouard* [*The Princes in the Tower*], in which the doomed children of Edward I are shown imprisoned in the Tower of London, inspired a play of the same name by the playwright, Casimir Delavigne (Fried 1990: 34). In fact, we could go further in citing Delaroche's connections with the stage. Delavigne's play was not merely inspired by this painting, it included a tableau, or realization, of it. Indeed, Delaroche's historical pictures seem to have invited such treatment, for several of his other works were also realized in theatrical performances (Robbins 2010: 110).

The case for this artist's theatricality certainly seems strong. However, despite the frequency with which Salon critics complained of theatricality, I have only come across one contemporary account that accuses Delaroche of this failing.[{note}]<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, he was singled out for the absence of theatricality in his work. In her review of Delaroche's *Execution of Lady Jane Grey* at the Salon of 1834 Elisa Souty, writing for the *Journal des femmes*, wrote, for example, that (fig.1):

There is not one over-the-top expression in this painting, not one of those theatrical attitudes that hurt the eye like a false note hurts the ear. (Souty 1834: 88)

[FIGURE 1 HERE PLEASE. Caption: Paul Delaroche, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, oil on canvas, 1834, National Gallery, London]

Enthralled by the painting, Souty imagines the young Queen's thoughts, or, rather, the absence of conscious thought, as she waits for the axe to fall:

She has no memories now, nor hopes; life, youth, love, pursue her no more with their intoxicating images; the promises of religion no longer offer her any support ... She is no longer a queen, no longer a woman, everything disappears for her, apart from this block that she dare not touch, apart from this axe, which she knows hangs already above her head. What truth in this collapse of thought, in this destruction that precedes destruction ... (Souty 1834: 88)

Souty claimed to speak for the 'ordinary' non-expert viewer, stating at the start of her review her 'complete ignorance of all the rules of art' (Souty 1834: 88). This brings me to my second point, which is the way that theatricality has become associated with a kind of debased popular taste. Delaroche certainly held a particular appeal to the popular audience, a relatively new presence at the Salon exhibitions of the 1820s and 1830s. However, Fried assumes that Delaroche's popularity is owing to the sort of broadly over-telegraphed appeal to the spectator that we associate with theatricality. Delaroche, he argues, 'too grossly solicits the viewer's imagination'; yet this grossness appeals to a popular audience unable to 'appreciate more refined and demanding modes of painting' (Fried 1990: 34-5).

Even those scholars that take a more measured view of this issue agree with Fried that popular demand in this period was for broad legibility and crudely drawn messages, images that were, in other words, theatrical. In his seminal book *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* of 1983 Martin Meisel explains, for instance, that nineteenth-century narrative painting had no place for 'indigestible anomalies or excessive ambiguity'. The popular audience is thought to have welcomed images that are 'half-expected [...] conditioned by previous representations', meaning those which, corresponding to pre-existing ideas, are more easily interpreted (Meisel 1983: 28).

The 'ordinary' public was certainly drawn to *Jane Grey*, and its success was deemed to rest largely on the expression of the central figure. As Planche wrote, the public were in 'ecstasies' over the attitude of Jane Grey.<sup>[note]2</sup> However, its appeal lay not in the over-telegraphing of a conventional idea, but in its ambiguity. Indeed, Planche (who disliked the picture) claimed to be unable to decode the figure of Jane and wondered what Delaroche intended to signify by such an odd posture:

After having for a long time searched for what the attitude and gesture of Jane signifies, I must opt for sleepwalking ... I cannot understand clearly the movement of the right thigh. If the lack of balance must serve to express terror, as some indulgent opinions claim, the method chosen by the painter is at the least singular; moreover, it creates a poor line. (Planche 1834: 51-2)

The artist had, in fact, shown the blindfolded Jane unbalanced, having unwittingly knelt on the fabric of her skirt with her left knee, while her right hovers in mid-air. What could he hope to signify by this accidental, fumbling instant of incoherence? History painters were expected to choose a moment from a given action that would convey the state of mind of the central and subsidiary personages through a figural pantomime that was both eloquent and graceful (while, of course, avoiding theatricality). The term that critics and theorists used to describe movements and gestures that, while perhaps true

to life, were odd, singular, or in some way atypical, was 'trivial' (Paillot de Montabert 1829 vol. 5: 417-8). Such attitudes were an aspect of experience, but they did not signify, and therefore had no place in serious painting where the aim was to portray heroic action. Planche's comments were intended to disparage Delaroche, yet there is something in his suggestion of unconsciousness that rings true. Indeed, as Souty wrote, Jane Grey seemed to experience a 'collapse of thought'. Whether critics found this strategy baffling (as did Planche) or whether they found it thrillingly authentic (like Souty), in focusing on this 'trivial' reflex action, Delaroche went further than most in avoiding theatricality, even to the point of compromising grace and legibility. Far from performing, Jane Grey appears to have been caught in a moment of involuntary movement and loss of control.

The subsidiary figures are also less, rather than more, legible than would have been expected in a conventional history painting. The face, and, in particular, the eyes, would traditionally have been the expressive focus of a history painting. Here, they are all hidden. As the writer and critic Théophile Gautier joked, 'in the whole of *Jane Grey* there is only one eye' (quoted in Girard 1994: 189). By conventional standards, Delaroche's moment seems poorly chosen. Yet the very ineloquence of the picture secured its 'authenticity'.

The painting's popular success rested, then, on the ambiguity of its figural pantomime, which was perceived as authentic. This is contrary to the assumptions of Fried, yet, as contemporary accounts attest, while the aesthetic evaluation of painting required a level of connoisseurship, emotional engagement, relying (as was thought) on innate responses, was considered to be the province of the 'ordinary', non-expert viewer. For this type of spectator, more than for any other, the figural expression of a picture had to be effective. There is a further issue here, for art historical treatments of theatricality imply, along with a sense of broad legibility, a type of crude message-making in which the artist cynically appeals to popular thirst for the affirmation of received views. Yet Souty's imaginative identification with Jane

Grey evokes a complex state of mind that is strikingly at odds with contemporary understanding of this historical figure.[{note}]3

So Delaroche cannot be considered theatrical in the sense meant by Fried, but he did have strong connections with the theatre, as I have mentioned above. Moreover, his contemporaries frequently likened his paintings to drama, and, in particular, melodrama. This apparent contradiction is explained by a phenomenon that Fried does not acknowledge: the anti-theatrical movement in the theatre itself. There, too, it was thought that the spectator's emotional engagement depended on the apparent absence of artifice. The strategies used to achieve the effect of authenticity on stage have striking parallels with those used by Delaroche. For a group of actors who began their careers in the melodrama theatres of the boulevard du Temple in 1820s and 1830s, the 'real' became signified by qualities of awkwardness, incoherence, illegibility, and apparent loss of control. Frédérick Lemaître was, for instance, accused of a 'repulsive realism' (de Manne and Ménétrier 1877: 279). Bocage (Pierre-Martinien Tousez) was noted for his 'bizarre bearing', famously performing with his back to the audience (de Manne and Ménétrier 1869: 267). Critiques of the actress Marie Dorval are particularly suggestive. Her posture was variously described as 'bent', 'hunched', and 'collapsed', her expression 'sullen' and 'insignificant', her vocal performance 'hoarse', 'rasping', even incomprehensible.[{note}]4 These very qualities marked it as 'authentic'. Gautier likened Dorval's performances to a 'natural' style in painting and described Dorval and Bocage as 'essentially modern', 'throwing out the most terrible words, absolutely as you and I would say them in a similar situation' (Gautier 1858--9, Vol. 2: 286, 320).

An interest in the transient and the mundane continue to be regarded as the preserve of the avant-garde and thus of an elite audience who, it is thought, were alone capable of engaging with the ambiguities and complexities of modernity. Yet popular art and theatre could, in their way, be just as experimental and challenging. The last word must go to the scenic designer Charles Séchan who, describing Dorval's half deliberate, half



unconscious, fall down the stairs at the end of *Chatterton*, identified this gesture, in which the authentic and the accidental are bound together, as a moment of 'sublime triviality' (fig. 2).<sup>[note]5</sup>

[FIGURE 2 HERE, PLEASE. Caption: Duvignaud and Gabin, *La chambre de Kitty Bell*, acts I, II, and second tableau of act III of *Chatterton* by Alfred de Vigny, oil on canvas, 1877, for a production of 1877, modelled on the original scenic design by Séchan, Feuchère and Co., 1835, Collections de la Comédie-Française]

## Notes

1. Gabriel Laviron referred to Delaroche's Jane Grey as an 'actrice qui crainte de perdre quelque chose de sa grâce en s'abandonnant trop à l'impression du moment', quoted in Shelton, 2001, 727.
2. 'Le public s'extase volontiers sur l'attitude de *Jane Grey*', Planche, 1834, p. 51.
3. Planche, for one, complained that Delaroche had misrepresented Jane Grey's character. Planche, 1834, pp. 51—2.
4. Press cutting, c. 1840; 'rauque', Nozière, n.d..
5. Charles Séchan [1883], quoted in Razgonnikoff, 2006, p. 30. Dorval played Kitty Bell in Alfred de Vigny's, *Chatterton* (first performance, Théâtre-Français, 12 February 1835).

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